10: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
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There are a few Karens in the ranges of hills as far north as a line running through Thayetmyo and Pyinmana. To the east, Loikaw is a Karen district and Karens are found farther eastward in Thailand. For the most part the Karens share their localities with the Burmans and Shans. Their villages are now found scattered over the plains as well as the hills in Lower Burma all the way from Pyinmana to Victoria Point and from Arakan to some indefinite line in Thailand. It has been reported that there are a few scattered Karen communities even as far east as Cambodia, but they have been pretty well absorbed by the more aggressive surrounding races.

During the unsettled Burmese times they clung to the hills and the remote forests for their security and wrested a precarious living there, but with the more peaceful conditions brought about by the settled British Government they spilled over into the plains and, clearing tracts of forest for villages and tracts for paddy fields, they settled down and became prosperous. Therefore they may now be found in every district of Lower Burma. In such sections as around Bassein, Pyapon, Pegu, Thaton, Moulmein, and Tavoy they comprise a very considerable minority of the population.

In the hills the Karen villages are usually at the top of a ridge. The houses are close together and in some places they are surrounded by a stockade of bamboo with sharp pickets pointing outward to reinforce the fence. There are seldom more than twenty to thirty houses in a village.

When they build on the plains they usually select a site away from the roads where they will attract least attention and be free from intrusion. Often in the villages there is little attempt at orderly arrangement of the houses.

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361 One may front against the back of the next. Here the individuality of the Karens is made manifest.

178 463 Originally they were, almost without exception, agriculturists and therefore kept to the outlying districts. Their villages were small for they did not have the power to organize a large society. But later, as they began to grow more prosperous and some of them became well-to-do landowners, they moved into the towns. With the spread of education they took up such posts in the cities as teachers, clerks, policemen, and officers and men in the 369 Burma Army, and in a few instances as traders. Therefore in the vicinity of each of the larger towns and cities of Burma there was, at the time of the invasion, a community of Karens usually living in a section by themselves, for they are gregarious. In Rangoon, however, many Karens were to be found renting apartments and living among other peoples in the city, and men and women were to be found in small numbers everywhere.

III

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

144 In appearance the Karens are not very different from the other Mongoloid peoples in Burma. Their usual colour is a little lighter than the Burmans', and is that of coffee with a generous mixture of milk. Their faces are a little flatter than the Burmans'. Having lived mostly in the hills they have a more stocky body and thicker thighs and calves than those of their neighbours. In height they are short, the men averaging a little over five feet, and the women a little less.

Young people of both sexes are attractive and robust,

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among different tribes. In many of the more civilized sections they are no longer carefully observed. Christians do not resort to them.

Sex irregularities are believed to be most abhorrent to the *bgha* and are reputed to have been the cause of most trouble. Among the Bwès they are considered to cause the drying up of land and the failure of crops, and are therefore most severely punished by the elders when discovered. In their primitive state the Karens were unusually free from fornication and adultery. The recent transition period, with the breaking down of old customs and before Western ideals have been established, has seen some relaxation of these conditions.

The old epic song about *Ywa*, the Father God and Creator, and this belief in the existence of God are found among all the tribes. It does not, however, play an important part in their daily lives which are taken up with their struggles with the ever-present *nats* and demons.

Those Karens who were in closest contact with the Burmans, as for example the Pwo Karens, took on a thin veneer of Buddhism and went to the pagodas at the full moon and the quarters, but as a rule it was largely a social conforming that did not have a deep spiritual content.

VI

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Karen is an agglutinated monosyllabic language belonging to the Sinic family of languages. Like the Chinese it has tones which are important in learning to speak it, for the same sound may have entirely different

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roomy so that a man could squat down and pull his knees up inside the garment. Sometimes it was folded around the loins as its wearer squatted on the ground or mat. On cold mornings extra warmth was obtained by wrapping a blanket round the body, either a thick one of the same hand-woven cotton, or one of wool bought from some bazaar.

In the Toungoo Hills, the Bwè and other tribes usually wore a shorter smock, with all kinds and variations of stripes, which would hardly reach to their knees. They covered their legs with baggy Shan "bombies" or pants, usually black in colour.

For a number of years the Karens on the plains and in the towns have worn the usual Burmese dress consisting of a *longyi* (skirt) with a white jacket in the warm weather and dark thick imported clothing in the cold.

The usual dress for the women has been the *longyi*, worn over the lower part of the body and a shorter *hsay* or smock over the upper part. The former was woven by the women themselves but the latter was often of imported cloth, usually black. Sometimes black velvet was used for the smock. Among the Sgaws the finest smocks were made of homespun black or dark blue cloth and were trimmed with rows of Job's Tears, the white seeds that grow readily in their plantations. Otherwise, bits of blue or red ribbon or strips of cloth were used for ornaments. Often many strings of beads were wrapped about the neck, some of which were supposed to have magical value to ward off evil spirits.

The women of the villages near Thandaung among the Bwès, or Mopghas as they call themselves, wove very elaborate skirts in which a number of colours were beauti-

10: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
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178 fully blended together, but the weaving of these skirts was almost a lost art at the time of the invasion.

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562 Little children were wrapped in blankets or in garments that were cast off by their elders. When romping boys began to run around they did not bother with clothes until they were five or six, or even older. Little girls usually began to wrap a small *longyi* about their waists at three or four. Elders often went about with scant loin cloths, but very seldom did they appear without any clothing.

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177 With the rise of national self-consciousness, the Karens tried an adaptation of their national dress and, finding the old smock ill-adapted to modern conditions, they invented a jacket cut after the style of the ordinary European lounge jacket made of the native cloth and embroidered with some of the designs of the original smocks. There were many patterns of these and they became very popular among the younger men in the cities and towns and among older boys in schools. They were a sort of blazer such as is worn in schools in Europe or [562] America. A few Karens adopted the European style of men's dress, but few women in the cities wore anything except the usual Burmese costume.

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773 Among the Bwès and Pakus, another tribe near Toungoo, the women all wore skirts of an identical pattern. This had a black ground with two or three narrow horizontal stripes at about the height of the knees. But among the Sgaws there was a large number of patterns. The most common was a conventional design of horizontal stripes of various shades of red and in the middle a "python skin" in clouded pattern. This commemorated the old myth of the woman who was stolen by the

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1916) 1922 AP1 Burma
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291 177 In the matter of adopting foreign dress the women are more conservative than the men. Long after every man in a village has taken on the Burmese costume, the women continue to wear their characteristic black smock over their Burmese jacket and "longyi" (skirt).

291 The Sgaw and Pwo women, after arriving at the age of puberty, wear a smock ("hse") and a shirt ("ni"). Little girls wear a single "hse," falling from their neck to their ankles, at least when it is new. In some villages they wear a white "hse," without any ornament or color, but in other places they wear a black garment ornamented with colored yarns at the neck and around the armholes. In some localities the maidens wear the long white "hse," reaching to the ankles, until they are married; but it is more common for them to put on the skirt and wear a shorter "hse" at about the time they arrive at maturity.

291 773 286 The women's dress varies from one tribe to another, and in some instances each village has its particular weave. There is considerable general similarity of the Karen designs to those in the Malay countries, in Borneo, and in the Philippines; but the particular Karen design, among the Sgaw women at least, is that supposed to be derived from the python. The story is that "Naw Mu E," one of the mythical characters of ancient times, was kidnapped by a fabulous White Python and carried off to his den. Later, her husband, hearing of her plight, came and rescued her by sacrificing himself at the mouth of the den, whereupon the woman was released and enabled to return to the upper earth again. Various versions of the story exist, one of which is that she was compelled by the python to weave patterns on its skin that still remain, but on being released showed her contempt for it by weaving skirts for herself of the same pattern, thus giving it the gravest insult she could inflict. This pattern soon became general among Karen women.

291 296 Other patterns, of which there are many, are called by various names, as seeds, little pagodas, cowries, etc. Especially beautiful is the pattern or weave worn by the Mopgha women, which consists of a variety of figures in magenta, yellow, and green on a black ground. I have been told that the weaving of the designs for these [178] skirts has become a lost art, none of the young women of the few villages of the Mopgha tribe having learned to weave these garments. The Bwe women usually wear a black "ni" or skirt with

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
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paddy. A few paddy heads or even a few leaves of the ginger plant may be inserted in the burrow as a talisman to make the supply of paddy last the year out. The oblation on the threshing-floor or a similar one is then put on top of the paddy in the bin.

The Karen who is untouched by outside influence does not like to take up any other occupation than that of raising paddy. He regards his other pursuits as occasional and accessory, including the gathering of forest products, such as stick-lac and wild honey and the sale of fruit from the few mango trees he may possess. He has not been found satisfactory as a day-laborer or coolie for any continued work; he avoids hiring out as a cartman and does not succeed as a petty trader. In more extensive business he has achieved success in only a few instances. With the advantages of education, however, a few have prospered in commercial life and other callings. Many have entered Government service and risen to positions of trust. A large percentage of those who have passed through the schools are clerks and teachers. One of the largest department stores in Rangoon employs Karen clerks with satisfaction, besides Europeans. Educated Karen girls take employment as teachers and nurse-maids, and recently a few have been engaging in clerical work.

TURNING THE BUFFALOES OUT TO GRAZE
These heavy animals are easily managed by Karen children, but are easily frightened by the presence of strangers.

19: Marshall M-6 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
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blood. They then consult the chicken's thigh-bones to see whether or not the auspices are favorable. If they are favorable, they say:

" 'We will grow old together;
We will visit each other's houses;
We will go up each other's steps.'

"The visitor then kills a hog or a fowl and performs the same rites on the other. On consulting the chicken bones, if the fowl's bones are unfavorable, he says:

" 'We will die separately;
We will go separately;
We will work separately;
We will not visit each other's houses;
We will not go up each other's steps;
We will not see each other but for a short time.' "

If the auspices are favorable, the two agree that they have entered into this relation of "do." They regard themselves pledged to each other as friends and bound to help each other in any manner necessary as long as they shall live. They call each other only by the name "do." In seasons of famine one aids the other to the extent of his ability. In case evil is spoken of one, the other defends him, saying: "That man is my 'do.' Do not speak evil of him. To do so is to speak evil of me. I do not wish to hear it."

Formerly it was the custom for many to multiply their "dos" in numerous villages, so that they might receive hospitality wherever they went and, in case of the planning of forays against some village, the "dos" might learn of it from their adopted brethren in other such communities. It is said that "dos" rarely quarreled, but remained faithful to each other. The institution seemed to exert a favorable influence on wild Karen society. Finally, Dr. Mason adds: "It may be compared to Masonry with its secrets."

The relationship named "tho" is formed by two men wishing to become brothers, by each drawing a little blood from his forearm, mingling it in the same cup, and drinking therefrom. Formerly the chicken bones were inspected in connection with this ceremonial, although nowadays they are not always used. This is a lifelong relationship and binds each to defend the other. From the time of the mutual adoption each calls the other "tho," and each speaks of the other by the same name.

The third relationship, "mwi," is one that may be mutually assumed by two young men, two young women, or a young man

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623 626 671 867 inhabitants of such a community were without proper guidance in the conduct of their affairs. They were left unaided by the experience of the past. The elders in the properly instructed villages were the custodians of the ancient laws, which they were not supposed to change but were expected to transmit exactly as they had received them.

67 538 577 571 The form in which these laws have been handed down is illustrated by the following saying on love:

"Children and grandchildren, love one another. Do not quarrel; do not find fault with each other. When we are in the village we are separate persons, but when we go to clear the fields we are brethren; and if one is taken sick on the road or in the jungle, we must take care of him. We must look after each other. When we cut the fields we are brethren. If one is sick, all are sick. If one dies, all die; and we must carry his body back to his house and lay it in the hall, that his brethren may see and his wife and his children may see that he is dead."

Other sayings of the elders are expressed in language similar to that just quoted and deal with such subjects as industry, indolence, helping the poor, widows and orphans, evil-doers, duty to parents, humility, swearing, covetousness, partiality, backbiting, hatred, quarreling, falsehood, oppression, theft, exacting fines, killing, famines, etc. Each saying or precept is in the verbose style of the one given above, telling the younger generations what they should or should not do. Dr. Mason has recounted these various sayings at length, as they were reported to him by a member of the Bwe group of Karen tribes. The sayings thus recorded are found to be similar to those handed down among the Sgaw and other tribes. It is worthy of remark that few of the elders on the plains [178] can repeat them at the present time. Dr. Mason's record covers some twenty pages in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, but I shall content myself with calling attention to a few salient points in the precepts.

538 671 577 The one on famines has but little of direct import to say about that specific subject. It reminds the "children" that the elder has seen much of life and its vicissitudes, including fires, floods, plagues of rats, and massacres by Burmans and Talaigns. He has seen one man invite another to a meal, in order to accuse him of stealing his food and thus have an excuse for selling him into slavery. He has seen a bronze drum exchanged for a sheaf of paddy

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"The sun is dark; dark is the sun.
The moon is dark; dark is the moon.
The face of the sun is black. We point to the plantain.
The tops of your trees are the roots.
The mouths of your rivers have become their sources."

"The face of the sun shines.
The sun rises and reveals himself.
The moon ascends and displays herself.
They sink into the great river,
Setting among the fragrant flowers,
Where the perfumes are most satisfying."

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No regular order of funeral ceremonies appears to be observed throughout the Karen country. Not only do different tribes have their particular customs, but also various groups within the same tribe differ more or less from one another. This wide variety of rites renders it almost impossible to ascertain what the original customs were. On the plains, where the Karen have come into contact with the Burmese, the old customs have largely disappeared and are known only through the reports of old men. Even in the hill-country some of the ancient customs have been discontinued, so that one rarely sees a funeral nowadays at which all of the rites mentioned in this chapter are observed.[3]

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Nevertheless, it seems to have been a universal custom for the elders to take a leading part in the ceremonies by chanting a poem in which they declare that the spirit of the deceased has left this sphere for another and a better life in the spirit-world. A poem of this import is still recited in Siam and is probably not widely different from that which was familiar to the various tribes in the early days. It runs as follows:

"On the other side of the great river [4]
The apes call loudly to each other and cry.
They cry, 'tis said, because death comes so readily:
Men vanish like water rolling from the caladium leaf;[5]
They enter life suddenly and die quickly.
One by one they tread in the steps of God's sons.
They return whence they came as attendants of God;
They spread his mat and roll his cigars."

[3] At a funeral which the writer attended in the Pegu Hills in 1917 only a few of the elders, and a young man who had come from Papun, could repeat the "htas" which were used in the ceremonies. The young folks of the village itself could only be persuaded to take part after much talking, and then they appeared to be ashamed and shy. Only one night did they attempt to recite the poems, and the next morning the corpse was taken out through the side of the house and carried to the burial place where, they told me, no further rites were observed.

[4] This fabulous great river is supposed to separate this world from the next.

[5] A drop of water rolls from the axil of a caladium leaf like a drop of mercury.

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the folk by which the traditions and customs were handed down from generation to generation. Among the Bwe, who seem to have esteemed priests more than the other tribes, there were four of these prophets who presided over the great sacrifice, the eldest being regarded as high priest. When one of them died, the elders assembled and chose which of his sons should inherit the office. Then, earrings, a headband, richly ornamented clothing, and a silver-mounted sword were secretly prepared for the ceremony of installation. A delegation of the elders took these gifts to the house of the chosen one, an elder going ahead to ascertain that he was at home. The party, being assured of his presence, surrounded the house to prevent his escape, which he must feign attempt. The presents were then cast before him. If he really desired to escape, he must do so before the house was surrounded.

In case the elders did not find the chosen successor at home, they laid in wait for him either by the path approaching the house or within the house itself. Sometimes an elder climbed up under the roof, hid himself until the man returned, and then dropped the gifts at his feet. The appurtenances of the priestly office, having been presented, could not be refused.[14] In some instances a "wi" was also a chief, serving thus as a leader in the tribe and in its magic. In any case he was a most important personage and was held in awe by the people.[15] Only a few of these men now remain.

The healing offerings dealt with in the second and third sections of this chapter fall generally within the province of the village elders, or are often performed by the members of the family of the sick person, for almost everybody knows more or less how to make the offerings, though this is not so true at the present time as it was a generation ago.

[14] Bunker, *Bwe Tha*, pp. 66, ff.

[15] For the "wi's" connection with magic, see p. 278.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
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served their tabus they prospered, but when they neglected them they suffered adversity, it is alleged.

Marriage of a Karen with a person of another race was formerly strictly forbidden. This exclusiveness kept the racial stock pure and unmixed. In recent times the prohibition has not been rigorously enforced. Hence, the barriers between the Karen on the one hand and the Burmese and Shan on the other have been somewhat weakened, betokening—it must be confessed—a moral looseness that was unknown before. The village elders have always maintained that marriages outside of the tribe ("taw leu hko") were not good, although such unions have not been lately tabued. Marriages between members of the same tribe or of the same village, providing the parties concerned are not more closely related than cousins, are permitted. To marry a relative closer than a cousin would be incest, and all the tribes forbid such unions. On the day of a wedding in a village the inhabitants are forbidden to labor.

Adultery and fornication are under strict tabu, except in the Red Karen tribe,[2] the belief among the other tribes being that these sins are offensive to the "Bgha" [3] and destroy the productiveness of the fields, the "Lords of the earth" withholding their favor from the crops when they find that such deeds have been committed. In making their annual feast to these deities, the Bwe tribe formerly required those who had been guilty of uncleanness during the year to confess their sins and did not permit them to come near the sacrificial altars.

A number of prohibitions are connected with birth. One of the Sgaw precepts forbids pregnant women to eat the flesh of the curious monkey-tiger *(Ictides ater)*, bitter herbs, and the long smooth pod called alligator's tongue. Before the men adopted the modern fashion of wearing their hair short, the husband of a woman who was with child was not permitted to trim his locks, for fear of shortening the life of his expected offspring. During the first six days following a birth the custom of the Paduang denies to the father the right of associating or even speaking with any one, except his own family. He alone cares for the mother and child during the period named.[4] The purpose of thus secluding the father is to prevent the transmission of the danger and weakness

[2] See Dr. Mason's account in the *Journal, Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1866.

[3] This is true in those localities where the "Bgha" are regarded as the family penates. In other localities, as among the Bwe, the offended powers were the "lords of the earth."

[4] Lieutenant R. W. Carrick, *Report on Bwe Expedition*, 1894-95, p. 22.

[5] E. B. Cross, J. A. O. S. (1854) Vol. IV, 298, 2. and D. C. Gilmore, Journ. Burma

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CHAPTER XXX

THE PROGRESS OF THE KAREN RACE

563 178 Although the Karen tribes have probably lived in Burma and Siam for more than a thousand years, in company with the Burmese, Shan, Siamese, and Chin, occupying no territory that they did not share with other people except the hills of Toungoo and Karenni, they have remained curiously isolated. Politically subordinate to the ruling races in the countries in which they had settled, except in the last named localities, they were subjected to oppression and exploitation, which they could resent only to the extent of local raids against poorly defended villages or of occasional assaults upon stray foes caught in the lonely jungle or in outlying districts. The inevitable result of these conditions was mutual hatred of the races, which was intensified on the side of the Burmese by their feeling of contempt for the subject race; while the enforced clannishness of the Karens drew sustenance from the conviction that their "golden age" lay in the past, and that the customs and precepts which they had inherited from the matchless elders of that age were not to be changed. There was nothing in the religion or life of the Burmese that appealed to the Karen, even if it had been offered to them—certainly nothing from which they could expect any amelioration of their condition. Progress was almost impossible to people so situated, who could only look vaguely into the future for the deliverer, the "white brother," whose coming was foretold in their traditions.

177 The acquisition by the British East India Company in 1827 of the provinces of Arracan and Tenasserim, on the western and southern coasts of Burma, respectively, made little impression on the Karen at the time, although it was the beginning of a new era in their history and that of Burma—one in which the ideals of justice and fair play were to become increasingly operative. Christian missionaries were beginning their labors in the country at the same time, thus making possible the spiritual emancipation to which the Karen had looked forward. The significance of these events lay in a double revelation, which the missionaries first imparted.